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A CRITICAL FRIENDSHIP

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A CRITICAL FRIENDSHIP

DONALD JUSTICE AND RICHARD STERN, 1946–1961

EDITED BY *Elizabeth Murphy*

FOREWORD BY *William Logan*

University of Nebraska Press

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Library of Congress

Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A critical friendship: Donald Justice and
Richard Stern, 1946–1961 / edited by Elizabeth
Murphy; foreword by William Logan.

pages cm Summary: "A selection of letters
from the first fifteen years of a sixty-year
friendship between American poet Donald
Justice and American novelist Richard
Stern"—Provided by publisher. Includes
bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8032-4504-4 (hardback: alk. paper)

1. Justice, Donald, 1925–2004—
Correspondence. 2. Poets, American—20th
century—Correspondence. 3. Stern, Richard,
1928–2013—Correspondence. 4. Novelists,
American—20th century—Correspondence.
I. Murphy, Elizabeth, 1983– II. Justice,
Donald, 1925–2004. Correspondence.
Selections. III. Stern, Richard, 1928–2013.
Correspondence. Selections.

PS3519.U825Z48 2013

811'.52—dc23 2013024668

Set in Lyon by Laura Wellington.
Designed by Nathan Putens.

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This book is for Gary, my friend in letters and in life.

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FOREWORD | *A Literary Friendship*

William Logan

Literary friendships are based on a terrible longing, the longing to be understood. Every close friendship is a love affair—or, between writers, really four love affairs: between the writers themselves, between each writer and the work of the other, and at last between the two bodies of work. Such bonds may be formed through communion of interest, mutual admiration, desire for flattery, hope of reward, or the need for an acutely critical eye—just the odd combination of vices and virtues any friendship requires for what psychologists call “fit.” Devotion may also prove a powerful goad to ambition, if the writer doesn’t feel worthy of the friendship. Such a desire was perhaps in part responsible for the depth and reach of *Moby-Dick*, which Melville dedicated to Hawthorne.

If writers want an audience in general, they want readers in specific; and for most writers a single sympathetic and passionate reader will do—if he’s a fellow writer. Such closeness of spirit gives the writer someone to write to,

as well as for. It might be argued that writers write for themselves, but those who have enjoyed intense friendship know that to have a perfect audience of one—the one who does not live in the mirror—is very different. There ought also to be some *mésalliance* between friends, some telling disparity in age or social class, wealth or reputation, some longing on both sides toward an opposite. George Sand and Gustave Flaubert found in their incompatible politics and the gap in their ages precisely what became the strengths of friendship. (I'm aware of only three sets of identical twins with literary careers. It would be instructive to know if they possess the bond described here. I would hazard that they do not, and perhaps cannot.)

Coleridge and Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley, Emerson and Thoreau, Twain and Howells, Wharton and James, Eliot and Pound, Sartre and Camus, Bishop and Lowell, Larkin and Amis—literature is littered with literary friendships, often more interesting for their asymmetries and disproportions. Emily Dickinson pined for a fellow spirit and came closest to finding one in the somewhat unsuitable Thomas Higginson. Lewis Carroll discovered such a spirit, for a time, in Alice. Perhaps this friendship is one of the strangest—it does not belong simply to that category of worship and bullying that forms the relation between artist and muse. (A muse must be aloof and unreachable—and she is not obliged to give anything back.) Before the breach between Carroll and Alice's family, which prefigured what would have been almost inevitable once she was grown, Alice was more than a muse to him. It was the intensity and intelligence of her pleasure that drove the young deacon to his peculiar fraught ingenuity. None of the other little girls who became his friends had that effect—and afterward there were no books as brilliant as the two written for Alice.

Like love affairs, such *liaisons dangereuses* are quickly contracted and all too easily broken. Literary friendship is rarer than romantic love and comes with its own peculiar liabilities. (It hardly need be said that romance and literary friendship almost never coexist.) Such friendships rarely occur more than once in a life, and when there has been a fatal rupture the loss is often felt permanently. Friendships founder on rivalry, jealousy, mutual incomprehension, petty slights, trivial misunderstandings—such bonds are even more fragile than love's. Fitzgerald was devastated when Hemingway betrayed him—he

needed the younger man's approval, the one thing Hemingway could never give. The young and overbearing Melville never understood how he had scared off the shy, prissy Hawthorne. Scholars who want to eroticize literary friendship apparently have no friends—or have been reading too much Freud.

Donald Justice and Richard Stern were unusually fortunate in enjoying a lifelong friendship ending only with Justice's death in 2004. They met in 1944 in the library of the University of North Carolina (now the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), where Justice came upon a young man reading an anthology of modern poetry. "Good stuff," he remarked. There the acquaintance began, though Stern, then only sixteen, admits that he had only recently acquired a taste for poetry. Such chance encounters give friendship the sense of inevitability usually reserved for romance. (Byron wrote that "Friendship is Love without his wings," which says something about Byron but much more about friendship.)

This edition of the Justice and Stern letters reminds us how fluid a young writer's art may be. The art that exists before craft may be plastic, unformed in substance even when driven by the deepest ambition. Though Justice was already leaning toward poetry and Stern toward prose, a range of possibilities seemed latent in the imaginative act. Justice tried stories (eventually writing some prize-winning ones) and fruitlessly attacked a novel, while Stern struggled to compose poems; but their imaginative command, and later achievement, lay close to their early inclinations. (Perhaps this division secured their friendship.) This record of the first fifteen years of their friendship shows the unsteady progress of their art—the false starts, the good ideas gone bad, and occasionally the bad idea forced to be good. The letters take us from raw apprenticeship to the publication of their first books, Justice's *The Summer Anniversaries* and Stern's *Golk*.

It is rare for a literary friendship to leave such a full account—during the friendship's formative stages, writers usually live within hailing distance. Except for a brief period in the fifties when Justice and Stern were both graduate students in Iowa City, their letters had to supply what they lost to geography. (The letters are one reason to be grateful for the high long-distance phone rates of the day.) Their friendship is uncommon for having begun so early, before either had much hope of success. It is also unusual for

having weathered the upheavals of maturity, since the argument with style can become a quarrel with friends, and success can be just as debilitating to *amitié* as failure. Perhaps distance worked to their advantage—the sole occasion they tried to collaborate, while staying two weeks together one summer in Connecticut, was a disaster. The house had a porch, and the porch a single comfy chair. The pair agreed to take turns in the chair while they drafted a play. One morning they argued over the chair, and the partnership was over.

If at times the great works of an author can seem an elegy for lost friendship, a wish to prove that the bond should never have been broken, it is perhaps more common for a writer's work never again to reach the heights achieved during such a friendship. To find one person who has an intuitive and complete understanding of your work makes a writer feel that the game is not so hopeless after all.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am extremely grateful to Richard Stern, Jean Justice, and the Donald Justice estate, without whose support this book would not have been possible. Thank you also to the patient and knowledgeable staff at the Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago and at the University of Delaware Special Collections Library. And for her guidance through the permissions process, thank you also to Deborah Garrison.

In the process of editing these letters, I was fortunate to have gained two great teachers. They shared their time and knowledge with me generously and without obligation. Their confidence in me was vital to this project. Thank you to William Logan, for entrusting me with the task of editing Donald Justice's letters. He advised me always with patience and good humor, and for this I am deeply grateful. Thank you also to Bonnie Costello, for her early encouragement and unending support.

Finally, for this book about friendship, I thank my friends.

INTRODUCTION

In 1944 the nineteen-year-old Donald Justice (1925–2004) headed north to New York City from his home in Florida, where he was completing his BA at the University of Miami. His plans to move to the city following graduation fit the ambitions of a young man whose interests ranged from writing poetry to composing music. During a stopover at the University of North Carolina, Justice made a visit to the campus library, where he was pleased to recognize a book in the hands of the young Richard Stern (1928–2013), Louis Untermeyer’s *Modern British and American Poetry*. “Good stuff,” Justice remarked, peering over Stern’s shoulder. “Like it?”

Stern, then sixteen years old and a freshman studying English literature, had picked up the anthology only an hour earlier. Before that, he said, he knew nothing of the poets gathered there. In a memoir, Stern acknowledged the lucky coincidence of being introduced to the modern poets in Untermeyer’s anthology and to Justice himself almost simultaneously.¹ Stern recalled

how impressed he was by Justice's worldliness—"He was from Miami," he would joke years later. After exchanging addresses, Justice continued north. Throughout the following year, the two kept in touch, and in 1946 Justice returned to Chapel Hill to begin his graduate work.

The time the two men spent together as students at Chapel Hill solidified an acquaintance that had been at first, of necessity, epistolary. There they formed lasting friendships with Edgar Bowers (1924–2000) and Paul Ramsey (1924–94)—poets who feature prominently in their correspondence—as well as the fiction writer Jean Catherine Ross (1924–), whom Justice met in a Chaucer class. Not long after, he married her.

Outside of their time in Chapel Hill and the two years they later spent together at the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, Justice and Stern wrote to each other. The handwritten and typed letters, postcards, and—much later—e-mails that form their correspondence, which lasted sixty years, ended only with Justice's death in August 2004. These letters document the growth of two literary figures whose writing spans an extended period in American literature.

The first extant letter was written by Justice shortly before he began work toward his MA at Chapel Hill, where Stern was in his last year of undergraduate study. *A Critical Friendship* begins there and concludes in 1961, one year after the publication of both writers' first books. The correspondence reveals the extent to which the friendship provided an outlet for their early drafts. In Justice's case, these include the poems eventually published in his 1951 chapbook, *The Old Bachelor and Other Poems*, and in *The Summer Anniversaries*, as well as versions of many that remain unpublished. In his own letters, Stern worked over the ideas that became his early stories and his first novel, *Golk*.

This early period of their correspondence conveys what both writers valued most in their friendship, their delight in the give and take of criticism. During these years, Stern sent Justice many stories and poems for his reactions. As Stern recalls, "No criticism, however harsh, was out of bounds."² Justice agreed, in turn sending poems, novels, plays, and music to Stern.

Though Stern's primary interest was fiction and Justice's poetry, each wrote seriously in the other genre. Those who know Justice primarily as a poet might be surprised to learn that, before entering the Writers' Workshop, he

contemplated writing a novel for his dissertation. Stern wrote and published poetry throughout their correspondence and in an early letter discussed plans for a volume of it.³ Their ambitions seemed to stifle any hint of unhealthy competition. To the contrary, the friendship inspired each to experiment. “How *do* you write a novel?” Justice enquired in a letter dated February 29, 1948.

Stern received a needed boost from Justice’s interest in his verse. “Don introduced me to the rigors of composition. . . . Any half-decent turn of phrase or meter fired the generosity. When I finally wrote one fair line, ‘The sun makes shadows of us all,’ the generosity was like a confirmation.”⁴ The effect was mutual. Justice looked to Stern for advice on whatever story he was plotting. In a letter dated October 8, 1956, the poet confided, “You are my barometer, my sensitive instrument, which tells me I am fair & warmer or cool & cloudy. So?”

What I hope to convey in the selection of their letters is a friendship for which writing and the sharing of ideas formed the foundation but did not set the limits. The substance of their generosity ranged from praise to chiding analysis, as well as pointed banter. In a letter dated March 3, 1946, Justice wrote, “The two poems you sent me I will be honest about. I did not like them. Although nobody else could have written them, they were not original.” Though still a young poet, Justice demonstrated a keen sense of his literary standards, as when he proposed just “what is really wrong with the poems”:

They show lack of organization, no feeling for form (though as I remember one was cast into a rough sort of sonnet wasn’t it?, there was still no *form* there), uncontrolled meter, now and then an obvious rhyme, and quite often a banal or borrowed image; furthermore, no suggestion of a complete world-picture was there, no moral structure behind or beneath the surface of the poems which would serve to give them meaning and life. . . . They seemed hurried and probably were, though I have the faith that you must on some things spend a great deal of time.

It is a rare friendship that offers honest criticism without causing trouble. Justice’s critical remarks, if rigorous, were offered in the spirit of good-natured dialogue. Though seemingly harsh, his response was couched in an otherwise genial, even self-deprecating letter about his own efforts in poetry, a recently

failed relationship, and somewhat extravagant plans for a trip to New York. He also asked Stern to send more poems.

With regard to the sometimes sharp banter between them, it would be tempting to think Stern the more vulnerable party, since he was younger and a less practiced poet. However, his willingness to accept criticism demonstrated qualities not commonly attributable to young writers, and his replies matched Justice's in confidence. In response to a draft of Justice's unpublished poem "Perhaps the Morning," Stern wrote,

You are preoccupied also with the inter-rhymes—flesh, thresh, fresh etc.—which may look good, but do not sound good (to me, at any rate). Some of your lines lack mutual support. For instance 'We like two idiots grow innocent together'—What addition to our image does the coupling of idiots [make] to the growing of innocence? An idiot grows innocent yes—but are two discretely significant? If so, they are not to the average poetry reader.⁵

In closing, he added, "Excuse the frank criticisms, Don. I want the same." Stern's criticism was both intelligent and resourceful, offering Justice more than a willing ear. In much the same way that Stern felt only his friend could "do justice" to a particular piece of prose or verse, Justice recognized in Stern a unique set of literary standards—what the poet valued as "stern sense." Justice did not merely excuse his friend's suggestions, he put them to good use, as a study of subsequent drafts reveals.

Taken together, these letters invite witness to the construction, conscious or unconscious, of two literary lives. Much here articulates how they created themselves as writers, not least in their determination to keep writing. Their moments of self-consciousness perhaps best demonstrate their attempts at self-invention. For Justice, these often sprang from an acknowledgment of his literary influences. As he wrote, with regard to a particularly convoluted plot-outline, "If you begin to suspect that what I tell you of it sounds not unlike Faulkner, I'm afraid you're right. The style has turned out to be, all unwillingly on my part, what the reviewers (if any) will call (if clever) an outright imitation, which is not quite true."⁶

Here and elsewhere, Justice anticipated the major criticism he encountered

throughout his career. Such criticism did not govern the course of his writing. He continued experimenting with imitative forms, and, with practice, honed the craft that many later praised as a distinctive feature of his poetry.

The selected letters also present fascinating character studies of the two writers. In the same letter where Justice struggles with his revision of a sestina, he rues his failure to bet on a horse at Hialeah, reports Jean's and his latest attempt to "win puzzles" in the *Miami Daily News*, and considers volunteering his services at a local production of Lillian Hellman's *Another Part of the Forest*, which he felt could be improved.⁷ Many of Justice's friends and former students have published accounts of his competitive spirit, some attributing it to his approach to craft.⁸ His penchant for games and sport is often expressed in letters to Stern, who was many times his friendly rival.

While this period saw Justice working meticulously to master traditional forms, Stern was often experimenting, producing work in a range of genres.⁹ Early on, Stern's letters expressed his dedication to fiction and poetry, and later his interest in writing for stage, film, and television. Despite his first impression of Justice, Stern was by far the more worldly. An eager traveler, his letters arrived from points across Europe—where he taught for a time at College Jules Ferry in France and Heidelberg University in Germany—and throughout the Middle East, where he made an extended side trip. While Justice's stories and poems focused largely on southern themes, Stern's spanned the globe.¹⁰

Two decades before Justice and Stern met in Chapel Hill, and about twenty miles north at Vanderbilt, a small contingent of undergraduates produced a magazine called the *Fugitive*. The young poets and critics in this group, soon known as the Fugitives, included the young John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and Cleanth Brooks, all eventually major figures in the American literary scene.¹¹ The *Fugitive* and its editors promoted a new approach to the writing and study of literature, longing for a return to tradition in a poetry that focused on form and technique.¹² Their interests extended beyond poetry and into criticism. Like their poems, the work of the Fugitives and of the later, overlapping group called the Agrarians expressed a desire to return to the social and religious traditions of the Old South (including

an agrarian way of life) while rebelling against the romanticism that often defined the region's literature.

The influence of the Fugitives extended beyond the South and helped lay the groundwork for what became the dominant approach to American literature in the mid-twentieth century. New Criticism emphasized methods of close reading, regarding works of literature, and in particular poetry, as aesthetic objects distinct from their historical, political, and biographical contexts.¹³ Although the Fugitives had largely disbanded by 1946, the pre-eminence of New Criticism thereafter is evidence of their legacy. Writing programs, which began as experiments at schools like Kenyon College and the University of Iowa, found their place not only within the academy but within critical circles as well. Notably, critics like Tate, Ransom, Brooks, and Warren, as well as William Empson, Kenneth Burke, Yvor Winters, and I. A. Richards, influenced this shift by fostering the development of younger writers.

Though Justice had grown up in the South and Stern in the North, the literary tenor of Chapel Hill, their meeting ground, was crucial to the direction of their careers. In the 1940s Chapel Hill was steeped in the southern literary tradition revived by the Fugitives and preserved in the values and methods taught by the New Critics. While at Chapel Hill, Justice sent drafts of his poems to the Fugitive poet George Marion O'Donnell and focused his master's thesis, "The Fugitive-Agrarian Myth," on the poets of this group.¹⁴ As the letters reveal, his stories and poems during this period and even much later resonate with the language and themes of Fugitives like Ransom and Tate.

Readers familiar with this moment in American letters will hear the influence of the New Critics in the early writing of Justice and Stern as well as in their letters to one another.¹⁵ The echoes can be subtle, as in their criticism of Shakespeare's sonnets.¹⁶ At times, the discussion of these influences is the occasion of their exchange. In a letter of April 14, 1949, Justice wrote, "Nobody dislikes 'scientism' more than I think I do; still, faith's hard nowadays, and I don't see why we can't write poems about its difficulty"—a statement that speaks as much to Justice's struggles with New Critical ideas as to his acceptance of them.¹⁷

Justice and Stern followed closely the work of the New Critics in journals like *Sewanee Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Accent*, and *Partisan Review*. In 1947,

after receiving a copy of *In Defense of Reason* from Stern as a wedding gift, Justice worked up a special interest in Yvor Winters. The following year he traveled to Stanford in hopes of studying under the influential poet and critic. However, he was soon somewhat disenchanted with Winters—and with the bureaucracy that made it difficult for him to pursue his studies.¹⁸ Justice returned to Miami without his PhD. What he had gained, however, was a vivid comprehension of meter—a celebrated feature of his poetry—and a rueful picture of his idol.

A good deal has been written about Justice's literary influences. What some have praised in his poems as a "deep engagement" with literature and a modern resourcefulness with traditional forms and styles, others have dismissed as an overt dependence on Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Yeats, Auden, Ransom, and Stevens.¹⁹ One of the most fascinating aspects of Justice's letters is his open acknowledgment of his influences, sometimes embracing them, at other times seeking distance. Early in his correspondence with Stern, Justice frets about sounding too much like Yeats (in poetry) and Faulkner (in prose). When he wasn't worrying about such things, he was building a strong case for certain forms of imitation. As even his earliest drafts demonstrate, Justice was a devoted student of the writers he admired, and he learned well from them.

Much less has been written about Stern's influences, though his letters are often revealing. As a young writer, Stern read the criticism of Burke and Empson with great interest and even attempted their critical and poetic styles. If Justice's idol in prose was Faulkner, Stern's seems to have been James and, later, Beckett. Unlike Justice, Stern was often critical of Winters. "Winters is Winters because nobody takes his poetry seriously, which means his major premise, that the finest poets are the finest appraisers of life, undermines even his criticism." Still, he added, "I think I'll retract this, too."²⁰

Another influence in both writers' lives, as well as an occasional participant in their correspondence, was Jean Ross Justice. From the time they met, the Justices spent little time apart, and Jean played an important role in the friendship of the two men. Before the birth of the Justices' son Nathaniel in 1961, Jean was busy as a writer. Her husband's letters to Stern discuss the plots of her stories while boasting of her success. In his replies, Stern addresses

Jean directly, joining in gossip and inside jokes, asking her advice on stories, and congratulating her when her own work was published.

Reading Justice's letters, one receives the impression that Jean often sat nearby as he wrote, chiming in. Justice occasionally pointed out how she poked fun at his letters as he wrote them. "Jean's been reading the first page of this letter and making snide comments, objecting to every word I say about her, and adding that I can't use the word 'bloomers' in a letter."²¹ Often her remarks were placed in the margins or in postscripts.

A collection of the entire correspondence would fill several volumes, while a selection covering all sixty years would not fairly represent any one period in their friendship. The later letters, while at times better written, lack the energy—if also the naïveté—that marked their earlier exchanges.

The letters here represent a single period of their correspondence, telling a story rarely shared, that of two writers inventing themselves. It could easily be said that these years represent their most fervent as writers, though both remained largely unknown before 1960. That year Justice celebrated the publication of his collection *The Summer Anniversaries* and Stern of his novel *Golk*. *A Critical Friendship* ends with their reactions to the reviews.

The largest gap in the correspondence, from the fall of 1952 to the summer of 1954, marks the two years they spent together as graduate students at the Writers' Workshop, a time both writers referred to fondly. Before and after, these friends often planned to live near each other or ideally to teach at the same school. The professional decisions they faced always presented the question of the distance that would come between them, the likelihood of visits, and even the kind of transportation required. As their families grew, they continued to see each other as much as possible, spending holidays and summer vacations together.

In 1955 Stern took a job at the University of Chicago, a position first offered to Justice, who turned it down because of the reservations he and Jean felt about city life. There Stern became a distinguished member of the university's faculty, retiring in 2002 as Regenstein Professor Emeritus. Justice spent two periods of his career teaching at the Writers' Workshop but he was also a professor for shorter terms at Syracuse University; the University of

California, Irvine; the University of Virginia; and elsewhere, before moving to the University of Florida in 1982.

The miles between them inspired frequent letter writing—at times weekly, and usually at least monthly. Shortly after Stern accepted his job at Chicago and Justice his at Hamline, the latter wrote, “I counted up the distance on a road map the other day—as I remember, it’s just under 400 miles from Columbia, Mo. Not too far for [a] week-end now and then, I hope.”²² The invitations to Miami, Paris, New York, Chapel Hill, and Chicago—wherever one or the other was living—seem never-ending. “I would like to get down to Miami more than anything,” wrote Stern in response to one, “but I’m pretty sure I won’t.”²³ In 1992 Justice retired to Iowa City—about four hours’ drive from Stern.

My guiding premise in this selection has been to establish a chronology of both writers’ early work—beginning with their meeting and culminating with the publication of their first books—and to highlight the influence of their friendship on their literary careers. In many instances, a letter has been left out because its content repeats that of another included or because it discusses the less remarkable details of their daily lives. The absent letters cover many of the same topics and themes and include further drafts by both writers. Viewed together, the published and unpublished letters reveal each writer’s development in greater detail. In the current selection, I have tried—as Justice described his method of selecting poems for his first collection—to “keep only the cream.”²⁴

Brief contextualizing statements accompany some of the letters and are intended to punctuate lengthier gaps in their exchanges. Cross-references are also provided in the notes to help readers navigate the published letters as well as to guide them to those omitted letters whose contents might be relevant. There is only one letter here whose contents have not been reproduced in full—in one of his letters from Harvard, Stern enclosed two student poems by T. S. Eliot, first published in the *Harvard Advocate*.²⁵ These have been cited but not reprinted.

In order not to disrupt the flow of the correspondence, editorial alterations and standardizations have been kept to a minimum. Missing articles

have been added in brackets. Misspellings and errors of punctuation have been silently corrected. In the early letters, for example, both writers often misplaced or omitted apostrophes. Later on—in Stern’s case, just after his completion of his PhD at Iowa—these infelicities vanish. However, I have retained what appear to be intentional misspellings. Both authors derived a great deal of pleasure from their typographical errors and from the puns that these errors occasionally created. Mistakes judged to be of this sort are left uncorrected here.

Biographical notes, including birth and death dates, have been provided for all individuals relevant to the American literary scene, as well as for persons whose appearance in the letters might be further clarified by such a note. In all cases, I have tried to keep notes brief, focused on the lives and work of Justice and Stern. T. S. Eliot therefore receives a substantial biographical note because of his importance to them as well as his significance to the New Critical work of the period; Bette Davis is described simply as an “American film actress.” When biographical information was unavailable, and for more obscure acquaintances of the authors, a note reads simply “unidentified.” Where vital statistics have been omitted, it is because they could not be found.

The poems included in these letters, though an exciting and distinctive element of the correspondence, are not annotated for their allusions. The emphasis here has been on the letters, though such annotations may be an important task for future critics.

For salutations, addresses, and postscripts, some standardization was necessary, if only to guide the reader from one letter to the next without confusion. Addresses written or typed on the original letter, as well as those in letterhead, are set in upper- and lowercase. All postscripts have been placed at end of the letter, though in the originals they are at times written in the margins. All other marginalia or insertions have been placed within the text where indicated by the letter writer.

Though not displayed with consistency in the original letters, all titles of books, plays, and films have been set in italics. Titles of poems, articles, essays, and stories are set off with quotation marks. The symbol for “and” has been standardized as an ampersand. Justice occasionally used ampersands in his handwritten letters, Stern at times what might be called a plus symbol.

While Stern's mode of abbreviation is an element of the physiognomy of the letters, its standardization as an ampersand here seems the least distracting choice.

Using contextual evidence from the letters, I have placed undated and unmarked letters within this sequence as accurately as possible. The approximate date and the probable place of composition have been enclosed in brackets. Following the close of each letter, the source or the depository where the original letter can be found has been noted, including the box and folder number when applicable. All letters marked "private" were provided by Jean Justice. Letters are also marked "MS" or "TS," indicating manuscript or typescript, respectively.

A CRITICAL FRIENDSHIP

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THE LETTERS

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CORRESPONDENCE OF 1946 TO 1947

Feb 5, 1946 | 1829 NW 46 St | Miami

Dear Dick—

My apology will have to be poems. I have done nearly fifty in the last two months, which is prolific for me. Many by now are destroyed because they were valueless, but some remain, doing their best to stand the test of time. Also stories, and my book (which I had to abandon because it soon seemed to contain too much bad and immature writing.)¹ That worries me not, however, for there are acres of time. There were a few other more mundane reasons for not writing letters to you. I was arrested, thrown out of where I lived, spent (almost literally) nights in the snow, got sick, and returned to the climate that birthed me.² Principally, to recuperate my fortunes I hope, so that I will be able to return to New York in the spring. After that California, Mexico, Paris, Ultima Thule. Yes?

Here are some poems.

Perhaps the morning
Its own kindnesses
Can never reproduce
But once, out of the night
Where we with leaves
Had left our excrement,
It raised up antlers of its scent,
Smelling us like birddogs out,
And smoking us from holes
Where we were burrowed in our mirrors,
Till, our plumage terrorized,
Like two wild birds we flew
Toward one another's sex,
And laid the eggs of sleep
Thus in our waking
More than ever in our sleep

Another.

Every moving groove of flesh dovetailing,
Threshing, flailing granaries fresh of love
Under the autumn of a falling weather,
We like two idiots grow innocent together,
Etc.

(The rest of this poem is not polished enough to show you.)
A new idiom?

Never go
Nobody so
But you
And after me
Has been before
You'll know
I go
And went
But never go
Nor want
But when
You say so
Or no³

In the same idiom.

Go back
If you can
To all that
Before now
Came
And seemed
Went

And another.

Through you
I do
And through me
You be
Too
It's true
Though you see no
And say so
You are yes
You are

Modified version.

What heat I give
And have
Only reflectioned from
The piece of glass
Where you've come
To shine
Though I confess
Long look to find
What used to be
The splinter of my self
Kindled there

And slightly different, not quite polished.

Poe and Virginia

The creature that between them slept
Was more than cats, and what warmed her
Hardly the fur, or even his hot words
That tumbled like hurt black birds
From lips she never kissed, or missed.

And though he hid the secret in a bottle,
That multiplied his enemies like children,
And curled the coil of her virginity
Into a snake to strike at him.
Thus she, in waterfalling drops of blood,
Surrendered daily inches of her life,
While he bled only hemorrhage of poems
From the consumption of his own original sin.

Excerpts.

From D. H. Lawrence (unpolished)

Even in Mexico he could not find
That colliery he had lost somewhere behind,
From which he still might mine the heat
That beat like wings to urge him on to flight. Etc.

Under the sun, that, afternoons,
Caressed him like a wife
He had grown weary with, Etc.

From Father and Son (unfinished and unpolished)

Am I that thing that melts the snow,
Makes it turn color run away and go,
Where no one not a fool may follow?

Those kissing words work wonders here,
Within the maze where worries wander,
Dolorous and dazed;
Warn me away to where
My world will never wounded be.

Thus beneath the rain's warm tent,
Convinced of guilt,

Lost in eclectic excrement,
How possibly can I remain content,
My thing impaled against
The sad blue fence of disappointment?

And on and on through the night.

I was sorry you missed me in New York. But I will not be such a fool next time, and make better plans for seeing you. I am sorry to have robbed posterity by losing your letter to me; but therefore I cannot remember exactly what you said, nor what your poems said, so am rendered innocent of comment.

At any rate, let me know what you are doing. I will expect a letter soon.

Don Justice

Stern Papers, Regenstein Library, 38:4; TS.

Richard G. Stern | 27 Steele Dorm. | Chapel Hill, N.C.

February 7, 1946

Dear Don,

It was good to hear from you. You seem to supply the action of our drama, while we here are merely a background. However we have our aches also, if they are a little less basic than yours.

To your Poetry:

You are writing euphoniously (except your attraction to “excrement” and your new idiom which seems pointless, showily⁴ empty and empty of good show)—your images flow very rapidly bearing your thought, instead of the usual—thought bearing them. Sometimes they are contradictory such as “Raised up antlers of its scent / smelling us like birddogs out, and smoking us from holes”—this is awkward. It blurs our impression while you are obviously trying to heighten with the many-angled quickness of the metaphors.

I don’t exactly get the point of “Perhaps the morning” but it is rather nice anyway.

You are preoccupied also with the inter-rhymes—flesh, thresh, fresh etc.—which may look good, but do not sound good (to me, at any rate). Some of your lines lack mutual support. For instance “We like two idiots grow innocent together”—What addition to our image does the coupling of idiots [make] to the growing of innocence? An idiot grows innocent yes—but are two discretely significant? If so, they are not to the average poetry reader.

The “D. H. Lawrence” fragment is swell. Your images are held together and their intensity brings like feeling to the reader.—Don’t make it too long and it will succeed.

“Poe and Virginia” should be, and isn’t, cohesive. Many nice phrases “—hurt black birds.”

Your poetry sounds on the whole slightly more polished. But I’d try writing something, say like ballads, to get a line continuum serving your images. Read Spender,⁵ a poet whom you resemble but are now much inferior to.

Excuse the frank criticisms, Don. I want the same, but more I want you to be—supply the dashes.

Since I wrote the first part of the letter I have seen Virginia.⁶ She is apparently fed up and at that bewildering “falling out of love” stage. Poor Virginia (not intended as a pun for “Poe & V”)!⁷

Now let me indulge—these are not good but are *new*—and slightly better.

You cannot write: heat and twisted junctions
 Do not make for perfect journeys cross the continent of things.
 So if Excuse decides that cramped compunctions
 Are the cause, remember Daedalus’ wings
 Brought safety, so be not afraid
 To scorn the solar Triumph that passion’s fit
 For greater strength than yours. Some strayed
 Starlet breaking rudely from predicted orbit
 Perhaps, but not you. You were built
 For softer things. The alpine snows
 Will wait tho Hannibal lost. They won’t wilt
 If you decline seduction. Soft you now, doze

The sunswept day. A fresh chance
Breathes again tomorrow. Oh, life's romance.

From "An Eliot Apostate"

You are not Messiah, nor were you meant to be
An angel, suckling at the rim
The sweeter caressed air.
But mongrel martyr are you
Nuzzling the broken carpals with your broken caution.

Why, oh why did you dissolve
Into the river's fond paternity,
When with one more breath and one more lunge
You might have found the sea,
Messiah to Messiah to Messiah
Rivulet, delight the countryside.

Das ist alles.
Be good.
Dick

Private MS.

March 3, 1946 | 1829 N.W. 46th St | Miami

Dear Dick,

Don't feel like writing a long explanatory and dull letter just now. I answered your letter once before but never mailed it. In that letter I got involved in justifying my tortuous images so that it ran on for thirteen pages before I tired. A similar error in taste I will now try to avoid.

Since here (in Miami) I've written two fine short stories, several poems; and revised some ancient and recent stuff; but so little of it ever seems to get

to the final, satisfying state. This is a terrifying existence, never being able to say just what you mean, and even when you come close to it having your best friends say “It has all been a mistake,” or “I don’t quite see what you mean,” and all along you know they are wrong, dead wrong. But there is nothing to do about it. Do you remember, I think we talked about communication not being the purpose of art? I still believe this, though it is difficult and heart-breaking at times to work under this belief.

The two poems you sent me I will be honest about. I did not like them. Although nobody else could have written them, they were not original. You are trying to be Elizabethan, modern, and Stern all at the same time. You should really be more stern about it. I realize this is bad criticism, not cutting to the heart of any matter, really nothing but a minor witticism, which is what too many critics of the *New Yorker* school repeat all their lives. What is really wrong with the poems is that they show lack of organization, no feeling for form (though as I remember one was cast into a rough sort of sonnet wasn’t it?, there was still no *form* there), uncontrolled meter, now and then an obvious rhyme, and quite often a banal or borrowed image; furthermore, no suggestion of a complete world-picture was there, no moral structure behind or beneath the surface of the poems which would serve to give them meaning and life. Of course I am a fool if I expect to find such in only two poems. Nevertheless, it is true that I would like to. Some good things in them, principally in a few phrases, such as the “continent of things.” But this entire paragraph is really rather superfluous because you must have known before you sent them how I would react, or at least what was really wrong and what really right about them. They seemed hurried and probably were, though I have the faith that you must on some things spend a great deal of time. At any rate, send me some more of your work and at least let me look at it. If you’d rather, I can keep my mouth closed about it.

You were of course right about Virginia’s being “fed up” with it. I cannot blame her. When I’ve got it straightened out with myself I intend to write her a beautiful little letter. She had a kind of courage and perception of beauty, and a desire to do good and right, but not enough of something either to believe or to give up what she believed good for what I believed. It is no great tragedy. And I do not mean this to sound ironic.

I and a friend have earned enough to fly back to New York when the snows go. It will be sometime in April. They say there it is lovely then. That is what I want and need—a lovely place, a lovely time. And lovely people perhaps around me. We expect to have an apartment with records and books and pictures and people and warmth and whatever else good things there are necessary, and I will send you my address. Because I would like you to visit me when you can.

It seems I cannot get started on the same novel again or on another nobler one. The other, as I think I wrote you, turned out to be nothing but corny and immature. A great disappointment to me.

The poems I have written seem to mount up slowly; soon they may grow into a book. This is what I hope, though I tell myself it does not really matter. I may try to start getting things published soon. I have not heard, by the way, anything from New Directions for a long time, so as yet do not know my final fate there.

Write me again with news of yourself, and put in some poems.

Don

Stern Papers, Regenstein Library, 33:1, TS.

In the fall of 1946 Justice returned to the University of North Carolina, where Stern was in his last year of undergraduate study. Following graduation, Stern moved to New York City. Justice remained in Chapel Hill until August 1947, when he completed his master's degree in English literature.

Richard G. Stern | 239 Central Park West | New York 24, N.Y.⁸

Monday night [September 1947]

Dear Jean & Don,

I hope the hurricanes haven't touched you—at the most new styles of architecture, a little metaphor⁹—your marriage notice arrived today and its solidarity persuades that you'll survive much more than that.¹⁰

A little news. The Paramount business is off for six months or so.¹¹ I'm job-hunting—daily I feel the little silk strands criss-crossing on my neck and will soon find myself hanged by the neck till rich (\$100 a week in 31 years or so). This is about the worst thing I can think of but I find it inevitable especially since I'm very much in love and want to marry Jo as soon as possible.¹² Perhaps in five years I can go back and teach—after I've seen things & etcetera. As for writing, it is my moral responsibility and need. I will try at any rate.

New York is quite horrible. I am very lonely—my boyhood friends have unthinkingly made their abortive compromise with L—FE,¹³ the streets are filled with ugly people, phallic symbols and signs of weakness, signs of woe.¹⁴

I will probably get a job in publishing or magazine work, at the worst advertising or a salesman—in the former at least the company is more congenial.

I've thought of hundreds of plots, formerly my chief difficulty (I think). Here are a couple I'm trying to work on.

- 1) Boy home from prep school wakes up to see a girl (of 12 or so) across the apartment house court peeking in his window. Without looking at her he strips and does exercise. I'm not sure about the dénouement.
- 2) Old man nearly goes crazy when two kids pretending park bench is a train refuse to let him sit down till he gives them a ticket.

Of course these mean little as yet.

No poems except "Notes for an Audenesque" which I woke up to one night (blue pajamas).¹⁵ Here it is anyhow.

Towers rot
 Youngish men stiffen in strides
 Mice scream definitely in corners

 Imprecision surely in decay of cloud
 Forgetting of narratives
 Universal suspicion of murder

In earlier months
Stretching for orderly arrangement
In competition with unknown strength
We found riot and derangement.
Peace in quarrels
Solution in yawns, in yellow glasses

Spring used every primary color
Left us itself
Yes—some slept on the grass
Took two weeks in the mountains
Resumed the painting of a tree in Connecticut or Maine—
But we, given dried tubes, old brushes, canvases wet with failure
Cluttered our individual country angers
To pack & leave for the more general madness.

—(Haven't made a poem of it as yet—might try)

Went down to the Gotham Book Shop to subscribe to *Sewanee Review* (a link with my past & future (?)) & found a Fugitive display. Think they have Tate & Warren's poems etc.¹⁶ Will get them for you if you want me to. Tate works for Henry Holt—thought I'd write but despite our mutual acquaintances he might think me rude—I will hunt illegally & anonymous a while longer.

What's Edgar's address?¹⁷

Please send poems, personal news, literary gossip and any inspirational matter you can spare—I'm destitute.

Dick

Private MS.

October 26, 1947 | 1825 N.W. 46th Street | Miami

Dear Dick,

I'm terribly sorry not to have replied to your nice, dramatic letter sooner. Jean and I have been thinking about you a lot lately, about Edgar too, and even about Chapel Hill. But, believe me, we have really been living in what Jean calls a mad whirl ever since I started teaching, which was the first of the month.¹⁸ I have my just complaints about arrangements here; I won't bore you with the details, but with the generality—they overwork their teachers here. I haven't had one minute to write, hardly even a minute to read (though I did finish Mrs. Wharton's *Age of Innocence*).¹⁹ Jean has to work too; so she got a job in the university library. Because of some fool rule about not hiring faculty wives in the same department, she couldn't get on teaching English, though they needed a teacher. By the time she finishes cooking (she's still having a few problems with that), and she or I finishes the dishes, it's usually nearly eight o'clock. Then I have to prepare my lectures, or grade papers. We have to retire then—because the alarm is set for six. So when do we have time to be ourselves?

Miami, by the way, seems lonely too to us. For my friends—or most of them—have in one way or another grown alien as could have been—and was—expected.

I can't tell you how much of a boon that Winters book has been to me.²⁰ Among other things, I am reading parts of it to my sophomore classes. (I have two of these, and three freshman courses; the sophomores study World Lit, and the freshman Composition. We're reading, in sophomore, the *Odyssey* this week.) They are a little baffled. For instance, I read them the description of the Romantic theory of literature and human nature in his preface and asked them if he seemed favorable or unfavorable to it—favorable, the majority replied.²¹

I haven't made friends very well among the faculty. For one thing, I got into an argument with Big Shot No. 2—he was all for relativism in taste, and I for absolutism (since my conversion). We got pretty mad at each other. I do have two friends about my age who are also English instructors, one of whom used to go to school here with me, and the other of whom wrote his

master's thesis at Columbia on James Joyce's Epiphanies (ha!).²² But they're not friends in the sense you and Edgar have been.

I talked the idea of starting the literary review over with some of the faculty. They seemed favorable; they thought we might be able to get the money from the university for it. But I'm far from certain that I would want to get tangled up here in any sort of compromise, for I (and Jean, too, I think) want to clear out of here as soon as my contract is up. I certainly intend to apply at Stanford, not only for one of those writing fellowships, but for a teaching assistanceship, in case I don't win one of the free ones.

Which brings us around to Edgar. I haven't heard from him since he got to Stanford, though I did have a couple of notes from the West Coast. I am really dying to hear the story. His address is P.O. Box 525, Stanford U., Palo Alto, Calif.

Have you got Paul's address?²³ I seem to have lost it, and would like to write him.

I got a poem started—pretty well, I thought—on the honeymoon. But since then, I've only been lucky enough to add two lines, and those before I started teaching. I'm looking for the clouds to clear up soon. If not, I'm going to start neglecting my job. I won't enclose the lines, but hope I can show you a finished version soon.

What about Jo? Where is she? And when do you think it would be possible for you all to get married? Be sure to let us know. And send her our regards, or something like that. If she's in Orlando now, and plans to come to Miami for anything, tell her to come by to see us, please.

Thanks for offering to get the Fugitive poetry, but Jean and I have placed an order for about two dozen books with a local bookstore that handles the longhair trade around here, and their poetry is included. We've already got *Personae*²⁴ and *Go Down Moses*²⁵ and several other things to bolster our bookshelves.

We've both been a little sick with colds the past week, and aren't quite recovered yet. But, you know, the old trouper must on with the show. So I haven't missed a day's work.

I *am* afraid this has been terribly dull, but once I can get out of this fog I think things will grow livelier.

Best of luck in your job-hunting.

Jean sends her love of course.

And *do* write very soon, Dick.

Don

Once the blessed routine starts rolling smoothly, so do we (I hope).

Monday—By the way, Edgar's letter came back in the mails today. That Stanford address is apparently wrong. You could try Box 311, Decatur, Georgia, from which I suppose it would be forwarded.

Stern Papers, Regenstein Library, 56:2; TS.

Monday [November 1947] | [Evansville IN]

Dear Don & Jean,

Have just read your letter and I won't tell you how much it meant hearing from you. If the return address is surprising to you it is still bewildering to me.

I am the asst. mgr. of a dept. store specializing in women's wear. I make \$35 a wk. reduced by the Int. Rev. Bureau to \$29. On this I live. I am in a room with some people called Metcalfe.

I believe I'll stay here awhile but I know for sure now that this isn't my alley—I am speaking more broadly than brassieres. —That is comforting at any rate. In case you're wondering how I got here—after two months of trying everything in N.Y. (the Paramount job is off till December or March) and even writing & getting a nice if formal answer from Allen Tate at Henry Holt, I was sort of floundering. A friend of my uncle's offered me this and I was out of N.Y. two weeks ago Thurs. night. At least I'm out of the city & alone or rather lonely. The work is ridiculous but it has funny moments. I am treated with inordinate respect by a staff of 50 women & 4 men & try to look extremely wise and certain. The work piles up at times especially Fri.

& Sat. nights (11 & 12 o'clock) so I flirt with the office girls & this concludes my social life.

Edgar wrote about a week after I wrote—enclosing a Lowellistic²⁶ poem, which I thought the best thing he's done—I wrote him to Box 525 and have heard nothing. Paul wrote at the same time & I answered to 205 Whitehead, but have not heard, but I'm sure this address is right.

I wrote a companion piece to "The sun—" ²⁷ starting with "The moon makes monsters"²⁸ and have written two other poems which I'll write out—The first has been at *Kenyon Review* a month without answer. The second I started revising today.

Walking in the sun we will side-step the cars,
Obey the stop-lights, cushion with hands the itching sores
Shot by formula round the street. We will think well,
Softened by warmth, cognizant of universals,

Though uncertain, as if our nerves lay, jerked out, on the floor
(Aware in abstraction of infinite complication, sore
And aware) while this other we, blood soaking skin-knit lore
Feels somehow warmth and stone and movement in the sun.

Some have felt differently. For example, Kafka
Found the flawless groundwork bloomed
Impossible bulbs, coughed up

Monsters of unlikeliness, assumed
Oversubtle, hidden guises, Trains delayed,
False arrests made, love undermined.

There the enzymes that dismayed
The sugars of his life and laid
Him youthful in the ground, amazed, decayed.

I have planned a novel around a short story I wrote about the fellow who studies himself in college—the story turned out seriously—I just can't start the novel. I still don't feel capable of decent work but it's pleasant trying—

Jo is in Orlando, upset & confused as usual. I don't know when we could afford to get married—apparently not for years but you can't tell. She's writing advertising copy for a radio station and is not terrifically happy.

I read during lunch hours (and home in the nights) & have read faster (my race with time) than I ever have in my life due to the pressure of business—I read *The Castle*²⁹ in 3¾ hr. periods—was overwhelmed with it. Am reading *The Magic Mountain*³⁰ now and am surprisingly impressed by it—my absolutism is also removed from presumptuousness I feel. At home I read quite a lot—Yeats, *The Duino Elegies*,³¹ Fitzgerald (*Tender is the Night*³² is in many ways better than *Gatsby*³³), M. Twain, all sorts of things—*The Wings of the Dove*³⁴ (which was tough going).

It's awful that you don't have time to do what you want—your situation sounded idyllic & enviable—which reminds me—do you think they could use me down there—if I took an M.A. while teaching could I support myself? Still interested. How much are the Stanford writing fellowships—how many are handed out? It certainly would be fine with you two & Edgar. Is Peter's book out³⁵—I go into bookshops asking for it & tell them to be sure to get it in—meeting him once I feel like a missionary to the Eskimos. On the plane I met a lady³⁶ who “talks” about books on Indiana, Ill. & Kentucky radio stations & to book clubs—I told her the name of it, my name, your names, Edgar's & Paul's—told her to watch out. She gave me her card, told me to attend her Evansville lecture, listen to her radio program &—said she would—all in the day's work.

What about you, Don—how do you write a novel—how can you “delay” the things that happen & the things you want to say—I guess you just have to write two or more novels & either halve the characters' names or just amalgamate (outside of *War & Peace*,³⁷ the writing of which—as I recall—would give one a pain in the arm)—there's much to it.

I hope you get to work, get rid of your colds & be happy. Write very soon.

Dick

If a child should stand tensed like a Greek before a trolley
Waiting for a catch, motionless in holy folly

We will leap to save, dam with blood a generation's grieving,
Snatch our nerves, tingling like a music box, leafing
Time to graft the whole earth's stillness. Like balloons,
If we flesh we sink. Yet we reach into the palefaced moon's
Smug grab-box, bloat with words the tides rise to,
And medals that must rip to raise you.

Listen, upon these minutes I say there are no walks
In the sun, no firmnesses scudding like rails through
 sleep, stalks
Growing up to Jack or Giant. Ten million stars
Dash to us with planets, moons and grocery stores.
We at bat, nine men in one, must face them all.
Each step we take is a cotillion ball!
Each breath's a quiver whose most subtle arrows
Quibble not at men or mills or sparrows!³⁸

(I called it "Quixote Knew" tho I don't like this title.)

Songs I've Been Taught

Learning the postures of love, its peculiar measures,
There is no need to stumble, innocent
Like Ali Baba at the cavern of pleasures.

When we were ignorant with infant wonderment,
Continually discovering the same, unaware of the sum
(Like Valéry's gold fish), even the past was renascent.

But sprung from the tunnel, we gaped deaf and dumb
Before the endless spotless tracks, the railroad palace
Where one could lounge and drink or thumb

The schedules of malice,
Laugh discreetly with grey-headed wisdom
About the explorations of the phallus.

In the train, the wheels' kingdom,
We lay, relaxed and taxed with sureness,
For only outside error could corrupt the boredom.

Our stomachs felt no qualms of nearness,
We were always there and laughed
At gauche intrusions of newness.

Private MS.